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# The Use of Art to Increase Awareness about Mental Well-being and Promotion of Mental Health among the African American Community

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## ABSTRACT

### The Use of Art to Increase Awareness about Mental Well-being and Promotion of Mental Health among the African American Community

By

Andromada B.A. Murden

July 22, 2019

**Abstract:** Mental Illness in America affects about 43.8 million individuals in a year's time. Internationally, the number one cause of disabilities is depression, which impacts the lives of about 16 million people every year. Depression is the most common mental illness in the African American community regardless of age or gender. Stigma around having a mental illness discourages the African American community from pursuing professional help. Mental Illness in Atlanta is unique because the city's population is over 50% African American/black and this is the major demographic that does not utilize mental health services. Black Communities have developed a mistrust in the health care system, the root of which is multifactorial. In order for Black Communities to have a positive experience there must be access to care, cultural competence, an increase in minority health care providers, and most importantly trust within the patient-physician relationship. Natural helpers are individuals in the community that provide advice, support, and/or aid to other community members. They know what the community is lacking and the best way to ignite change through the social networks already established. Consequently, natural helpers have the ability to create a link between the community and professional health care services. The Emoji Art Show provides an outlet for Artist in various cities, including Atlanta, to heal and express themselves through art.

The Use of Art to Increase Awareness about Mental Well-being and Promotion of Mental  
Health among the African American Community

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A Capstone Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
of Georgia State University in Partial Fulfillment  
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MASTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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APPROVAL PAGE

THE USE OF ART TO INCREASE AWARENESS ABOUT MENTAL WELL-BEING AND PROMOTION OF  
MENTAL HEALTH AMONG THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

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### Author's Statement Page

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## **Introduction**

Mental Illness in America affects about 43.8 million individuals in a year's time. Nationally, the number one cause of disabilities is depression, which impacts the lives of about 16 million people every year. Depression is the most common mental illness in the black community regardless of age or gender. Stigma around having a mental illness discourages the black community from pursuing professional help. The coping mechanisms are usually found within their religious communities or avoiding the issue all together. A study on stress factors contributing to black mental illness reported that women attributed their mental illness to stress, trauma, drug use, alcohol use, heredity, family problems, and work stress. Men similarly believed their mental illness was caused by alcohol use, drug use, trauma, stress, and family problems. In the 90's, 60% of African Americans expressed the belief that depression was a personal weakness and up until 2010 that belief remained true. This belief is a contribution to the low use of mental health services as well as other physical factors including poor access to care, receipt of poor-quality care, and low availability of care. Mental illness is a major contributing factor to addiction, homelessness, and crime (Ward, 2013). In 2017, the National Association for Mental Illness reported an increase in suicidal thoughts and major depressive episodes. Even though treatment and support services are available to restore mental health, almost 60% of Americans have not received treatment or support. It was also reported that minority populations are 50% less likely to utilize mental health resources. The prevalence of mental illness is similar for everyone regardless of race, sex, and ethnicity but, there is a difference in the use of mental health services among races. These differences are often

attributed to lack of access, poor quality of care, stigma, culturally insensitive healthcare providers, and racism (Merikangas, 2010).

Georgia has been ranked number 34 (#1 ranking the best) in the national state of mental health in America. This ranking has declined from the last three years and illustrates how Georgia needs help identifying and treating individuals that suffer from mental illnesses (Ranking the States, 2016). This current status is possibly due to the low number of mental health healthcare professionals in Georgia. According to U.S. Department of Labor, Georgia has mental health counselors throughout the state, but mental health counselors are only sought out for specific task. Unlike, mental health counselors, mental health social workers have a larger range of services that go beyond counseling. However, mental health social workers are only available in Atlanta and there are only about 750 employed. Psychiatrist are also centrally located in Atlanta leaving the rest of Georgia lacking in a vital resource in identifying and treating mental illness (OES, 2019).

Mental illness in Atlanta is unique because the city's population is over 50% African American/black and this is the major demographic that does not utilize mental health services. African Americans mental health is challenged by social inequalities and they are aware of this fact. However, mental health stigma and low mental health literacy cause them to refrain from seeking treatment. Atlanta is a city cultured by historical events that have shaped the views of its population for generations. The history in Atlanta is rooted in slavery, civil rights movements, and tight knit religious communities. The community has strong roots in religion; therefore, they seek out prayer and guidance for mental illness from their pastors. However, some traditional religious leaders believe that mental illness is a result of spiritual failure. This



belief contributes to the reduced use of professional healthcare services (Hackett, 2014). There was a limitation when researching more supportive evidence on religious beliefs and the use of mental health services. More research is needed on this topic.

Historical trauma is a factor which leads to the decreased use in healthcare services. Historical Trauma is defined as, “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma (Heart, 2005).” African Americans have endured years of physical, mental, and emotional abuse stemming from slavery, discrimination, mass incarceration, misdiagnosis and various other forms of oppression. As a result of this historical oppression, African Americans continue to experience multigenerational trauma.

### *Historical Trauma*

In the 1600’s African’s were captured by Europeans and transported to America without the choice that many immigrants were afforded; one of the earliest forms of human trafficking. Once they arrived, they were sold and beaten. Some scientists believed that African Americans suffered from Drapetomia, a disease that caused slaves to run away from their owners. This led to slave owners continually working to make slaves more submissive. Three hundred years later, in the 1960’s, a condition called Protest Psychosis was branded. This condition later adopted the name Schizophrenia. Today, the black community is twice as likely to be diagnosed with Schizophrenia than any other race (Snowden, 2001).

In addition, the black community was coerced and exploited by scientists for research experiments such as the Tuskegee Experiment which left hundreds of African American men

with untreated syphilis for years (Tuskegee, 2015). These historical traumatic events have left black communities with a reduced perception of trust and safety, which has had a lasting effect on the mental, physical, and emotional stability of the black community.

Black mental illness is not limited to the historical trauma that African Americans have been affected by. Black Caribbean and Native African immigrants face the similar discrimination when they relocate to America. A study concluded that Caribbean men have higher risk for mood and anxiety disorders than African American Men. Inversely, Caribbean women show signs of lower risk for anxiety and substance disorders when compared to African American women. (Williams et. Al., 2007) Africans and Black Caribbean communities have a different origin stories about how they came to America and slavery may not be including in their history. Nonetheless, Black Caribbean and Africans face additional discrimination because of individuals' views on immigration laws and possible language barriers. Still, Africans, Black Caribbean's, and African Americans are all considered to be a part of the black Community because when in America they are all effected by a universal discrimination.

### *Mistrust in the Healthcare System*

Black communities have developed a mistrust in the health care system, the root of which is multifactorial. In order for black communities to have a positive experience there must be access to care, cultural competence, an increase in minority health care providers, and most importantly trust within the patient-physician relationship. Trust is the most important factor in a patient-physician relationship, and it can predict the prevalence of an individual seeking professional healthcare options. It has been reported that patient-physician relationships excel

when patients have physicians of the same race. When a cultural difference is present, unintentional demeaning behavior can be experienced through things as simple as tone of voice or hand gestures. The patient-physician relationship has been reported to struggle based on suggested bias, prejudice, and stereotyping from the health care provider. All aspects can determine good or poor quality of care (Kennedy et al., 2007).

Peer-led interventions have been suggested by urban community members as an approach to eliminate the stigma associated with using mental health services. Mental Health First Aid for the black community is a strategy to combat low mental health literacy in the population (Haynes et al., 2017). “Mental Health First Aid is an 8-hour course that teaches you how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders. The training gives you the skills you need to reach out and provide initial help and support to someone who may be developing a mental health or substance use problem or experiencing a crisis.” However, that suggested approach still does not eliminate the communities lack of access or health professional’s cultural competency. Alternatively, I believe that Natural Helpers are the link between access to service and cultural competency.

## **Review of Literature**

### *The Natural Helpers Theory*

Natural helpers are individuals in the community that provide advice, support, and/or aid to other community members. These individuals often contribute to their communities even though their efforts may remain unrecognized by people outside of their community. Natural helpers are effective because of their first-hand experience within the community’s

socioeconomic environment. They know what the community is lacking and the best way to ignite change through the social networks already established. Consequently, natural helpers have the ability to create a link between the community and professional healthcare services (Eng et al., 2009).

Public Health Professionals began introducing “Lay Health Advisor” interventions (LHA’s) in the 90’s. LHA’s are comprised of elected community members who hold similar roles as natural helpers. The primary difference between the two is that LHA’s are under the supervision of the Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2016). LHA’s could consist of pastors, farmworkers, high school teens, or anyone who has a voice in the community. The elected LHA’s are responsible for creating programs based on their observed community needs. For instance, a program called “Save Our Sisters”, ran by African American Seniors, was established to promote breast cancer screening for older African American women in North Carolina (Eng et al., 2009).

LHA’s have become an important part of the Natural Helpers Theory and health promotion because it is able to reach various audiences and numerous health topics. This theory is fundamental to public health because it observes a connection between social support and health promotion (Eng et al., 2009).

## **Methods and Procedures**

### *The Emoji Art Show*

Here in Atlanta Natural Helpers come in various forms. Though, the Natural Helper I would like to highlight for black mental health is an event called The Emoji Art Show powered

by an organization named Music Makes Me Happy. This organization is led by a group of young minority entrepreneurs who were concerned about the leading statistics about mental health in America. The Emoji Art Show provides an outlet for artists in various cities, including Atlanta, to heal and express themselves through art. While attending the art show, community members have the opportunity to collect information about Atlanta mental health services, write on a “venting” board, and be encouraged by other members of the community. Since art has been proven to be a contributor to an individual’s mental health, the art show is a great way to create access to resources in a culturally competent environment. One of the founders, Josh Dingle states that, “Our level of impact in the community starts with our own mental and emotional well-being. The Emoji Art Show uses a culturally popular device we’re all familiar with (emojis) to leverage deeper discussion about our emotional and mental state.”

#### *Short Documentary Film*

A short documentary of these events allowed a view into the black community congregating with one another with the intention of healing. An additional interview was included to gain insight to what the diagnosis process may look like for someone in the black community and how art therapy became a preferred treatment. Through the creation of this document I have come to understand why art and music can be beneficial for members of the black community. As a culture, music, art, dance, poetry have always been at the root of healing for this community. From slavery, black people coped through the singing of negro spirituals and dancing to uplift one another. During the civil rights movement, poetry and spoken word was an outlet to express the pain felt from injustices during that time. The creation of the hip-hop culture that includes rapping, graffiti, and dance which always reflected

the struggles in the environment around them. Art in all its forms have been able to aid black communities in their most difficult moments. Thus, in a modern society still impacted by historical views art has remained a constant healing outlet and will continue to be for black community.

<https://youtu.be/p6dErCv2180>

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